L: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

527 suggest, but at present there are few Buddhist monks in the
769 district, certainly not enough to perform these rites in
788 every household rich enough to pay for them.

Similar rites, but without the altar and the ancestral tablets, are performed by the same musicians and assisted in the same way by members of the family, on the anniversary of the death of any important member of the family, three anniversaries following the death being commemorated in this way. This ceremony, although no Buddhist monks take part, is none the less inspired by Buddhist traditions, for it is intended to make sure that the spirit of the deceased is released from the Buddhist hell, and transported to the paradise of Amida, a doctrine which in Mahayana Buddhism has nearly displaced the belief in transmigration and reincarnation.

769 Beliefs about the status of the spirits of the dead are in
779 fact confused by the conflicting theology of Buddhism and Ancestor Worship. It is clearly inconsistent to believe at once that the departed spirits can exercise a benevolent influence on the destiny of their descendents, and to believe that these same spirits are suffering tortures in the Buddhist inferno, or have been reincarnated as members of some other family or even race. The Min Chia do not make any attempt to reconcile these contradictions, professing ignorance of the real fate of the spirits, but performing all ceremonies which can propitiate or bring comfort to the dead. In spite of a long Buddhist tradition it is apparent that more weight is given to the belief in the power of the ancestral spirits than to the theology of the Indian religion. Many men will deny outright any belief in the Buddhist Boddhisatvas, expressing themselves in a popular rendering of the traditional Confucian argument against Buddhism, "Buddha is only a dead man, why should he have any power over we who are alive to-day?" The fact that this argument, if

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

valid, would equally dispose of the claims of the ancestral spirits, seems to escape the notice of those who use it. 769 779

In view of the general ignorance of Buddhist theolog and the manner in which Buddhist beliefs have becom incorporated into systems originally distinct, it is not possible to discuss Buddhism among the Min Chia on a theoretical basis. The practice can be observed, but if any attempt is made to fit it into the theory of Buddhism as expounded by scholarly writers, a false systematisation would be the only result. The Boddhisatvas are recognised as deities, with certain powers, and are served with traditional rites on festivals. These ideas may be bad Buddhism, but they are the working practice of the Min Chia, and as such the subject of the next chapter. Nor will it be profitable, in the absence of records, to discuss whether Buddhism was formerly practised in a purer form by the inhabitants of Ta Li. The Kings of Nan Chao certainly erected the magnificent pagodas which still adorn the city, but no evidence exists to show whether the peasants of that distant age understood the religion of their rulers any better than they do to-day.

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

CHAPTER 6

"THE THREE RELIGIONS"

(2) *The Gods*

776 779 796 FOR the Min Chia peasantry Buddhism means the worship of the greater Buddhist Boddhisatvas, who are thought of as gods, but gods with a specialised function. Kuan Yin for example is the Goddess of Mercy, the patron of women and mothers, and of fishermen. Yen Wang, the King of the Underworld, is worshipped and propitiated to secure the release of souls from hell. In practice all the other Boddhisavtas such as Manjusri and also Amida Buddha and Maitreya, the Buddha to come, have no separate temples of their own, but are accomodated in a shrine in the Kuan Yin temples. To the Min Chia to-day Buddhism is really nothing more than the cult of Kuan Yin, for this Boddhisatva has acquired an importance which completely overshadows Amida Buddha himself. Thus the only great festival which is specifically Buddhist is in honour of Kuan Yin at her temple south of the city on the 19th of the 2nd Month, a date corresponding approximately to the 31st of March.

346 779 This temple is a large building, or rather series of buildings round linked courtyards, entirely Chinese in style and decoration, and, though the site is old, the existing temple is quite modern. It was rebuilt about fifty years ago to replace the old one burned down by the Moslem rebels in the '70's. Since the great Buddhist monastery which once surrounded the Three Pagodas outside the North Gate shared the same fate, but has never been rebuilt, the Kuan Yin T'ang to the south of the city has become the principal

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

Buddhist temple in the district. Outside the temple gates there is a small village which takes its name, Kuan Yin T'ang, from the temple itself, and across the open space beyond the gate there is a large stage with dressing rooms for the performance of theatricals. The performances given here are watched by the crowd assembled in this market square, and are free, as an inducement to visitors to come to the temple festival. Almost every temple of any size has such a stage with an open air auditorium.

Attracted in part by the chance to see a play free, very great crowds attend this festival of Kuan Yin. From early in the morning the road from the city is densely crowded with holiday makers who can refresh themselves, as they walk the four miles to the temple, with fruit and cakes sold by numerous hawkers along the roadside. At the temple village the scene is one of great activity. The usual restaurants and teahouses, which on ordinary days do a small business with travellers, are packed to overflowing, the street encumbered with stalls selling food, incense sticks, and children's toys. In the gate of the temple itself the monks are fully occupied selling incense sticks, charms and paper "spirit" money to burn at the shrines. To the greater part of the crowd the occasion is just a holiday, or an opportunity to do business, and see the play. Particularly is this so for the men, for though many go into the temple to see the scene, very few worship.

On the other hand most of the women have come primarily for the religious aspect of the day, and it is they who buy the incense sticks and the spirit money. Before every shrine in the temple precincts a large fire of incense sticks is kept burning by the offerings of these faithful worshippers, who visit each in turn. The act of worship is in each case the same. The devotees *k'e t'ou* before the shrine, throw a cash or two on to the embroidered cloth spread

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

before the image of the deity, and add a stick or two of incense and some paper spirit money to the fire. At one shrine, that of Amida Buddha, a sort of religious cock-shy attracts great crowds. A curtain is suspended before the image with a narrow slit through which he can be seen. The worshippers endeavour to throw cash through the slit and hit the god, and to do this is regarded as very lucky. The numerous coins which miss slide down the curtain into a wooden chest to swell the temple funds. The economic aspect of the festival from the point of view of the monks is indeed everywhere quite apparent.

The only shrine which has what might be called a set service is that of Kuan Yin herself, in the main hall. Here all day monks chant sutras to the accompaniment of music while the lay worshippers come and go, prostrating themselves and burning their incense at the shrine door. Elsewhere, in corners of the courtyards, or at the foot of one of the great trees which shade them, circles of pious women tend an altar and an incense fire throughout the day. Standing in a half circle before the altar they chant sutras, or often simply repeat the names of Kuan Yin and Amida, keeping time on little gongs and wooden drums made in the shape of a fish. These women belong to societies which take a vow of partial or total abstinence from meat and wine, and meet at the festivals to perform these rites. They set up their own altar, a simple table covered with dishes of fruit and sweetmeats, and burn their incense before it. They are in no sense priestesses, for they are married women, usually elderly, who have joined a society of abstainers, the object of which is to acquire merit individually. Nor do they confine themselves to the worship of one god. At the festival of Tung Yueh, the Taoist King of the Underworld, and at that of the Mountain God and the Lake Dragon King, the same women go through the same rites.

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

(2) THE GODS

The festivals of these deities are in fact in every way similar to that of Kuan Yin. At the festival of Tung Yueh, the Taoist King of the Underworld, there are some slight variations. In front of the main shrine of this temple there is a large water tank crossed by a low bridge of stone. Here curious rites are performed intended to assist the dead to escape from hell. Little cheap pottery bowls with a lighted candle stuck in them are launched on the waters of the tank, and the worshipper endeavours to steer the bowl under the bridge into the other part of the tank, and so to the further side of it. If this is successfully performed it is believed to be an omen that the soul of the deceased person has escaped from hell. At the same time little ladders made of bamboo, the size of toys, are lowered end on into the water, also with the intention of helping the dead to escape from the underworld. It is not easy to steer the bowls with their candles still alight to safety, for the worshipper must not touch the bowls, only being allowed to swish the water about with a stick and so create currents which waft the bowl through the narrow opening of the bridge. Consequently the surface of the water is soon strewn with candle ends and the bottom of the tank with sunken bowls.

It might be supposed that these evil omens would have a depressing affect on the crowd and the unsuccessful worshippers, but in fact the whole performance seems to be more in the nature of a game than a religious rite. The theoretically solemn business of liberating a soul from torment is left to the unskilful hands of small children, or the too vigorous splashings of schoolboys, while an irreverent crowd of their playmates cheers a success or laughs derisively at a failure. Young men can be heard laying odds on one bowl or against another, a striking instance of the gambling spirit intruding into what was once, perhaps, a truly religious rite.

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

Associated with this festival of Tung Yueh is a curious custom which has given it the name of the beggars' festival. Not only all the genuine whole-time beggars from the whole countryside assemble to line the road to the temple and crave alms, but also many hundreds of the poor who are childless. It is believed that if a childless couple make an offering with money obtained by begging, their prayers will be granted and the woman will conceive. For nearly a mile from the north gate to the temple itself the path is lined on both sides with these mendicants, and it is considered becoming to give at least one cash to each. Over a hundred of these almost valueless coins go to a dollar nickel, so the expense is not great. No one, however, can explain why the King of the Underworld should be associated with childbirth rather than Kuan Yin the goddess of mothers.

Kuan Yin and Tung Yueh are the only gods strictly Buddhist or Taoist which have great festivals in the Ta Li district, the other festivals being in honour either of no specific deity, or of the Lake Dragon, and Sai Sur, the Mountain God, which are local deities in no way connected with Taoism. The festival of the Mountain God, held at his principal temple at the base of T'sang Shan about two miles from the city, takes place in May, but here the ritual is in every way exactly a repetition of that observed at the Kuan Yin T'ang, except that there is no play performed, since the stage was ruined by a fire some years ago and is only now being rebuilt. The fact that the temple authorities have gone to this expense may indicate a realisation of the importance of giving theatricals if a large attendance is to be expected. On this occasion many of the worshippers as well as the sightseers make a further climb up to the Chung Ho temple, situated about two thousand feet above the city in a beautiful pine wood. Most go up simply for the view, which is superb, but the temple shares in the festival and incense is

1: Fitzgerald II-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

burned there also, although it is dedicated to Yu Huang, the Jade Emperor, supreme deity of official Taoism, and not to the Mountain God. A well-kept shrine to the Mountain God is maintained just outside the limits of this temple, possibly as an inducement to the worshippers who might not otherwise make the effort to climb so high. This is one more instance of the characteristic Min Chia indifference to theology and the essential unity of the so-called "three religions."

The dates chosen for these festivals, almost all either in the spring or autumn, the two seasons when the weather is best, indicate the practical ends in view. In summer when the rains are heavy, few people could be induced to risk a long climb up the mist-wrapped mountain. Equally the winter, a season of high winds, which make boating unpleasant and dangerous, would be unpopular for the festival of the Lake Dragon, when boating expeditions are one of the attractions. This festival is therefore held on the 8th of the 8th month, about the twelfth of September, when the rains are almost over and the winter winds not yet begun. The local Chinese call this the Dragon Boat Festival, after the famous Chinese holiday which falls on the 5th of the 5th month, but in fact it has nothing to do with the Chinese celebration in honour of the poet and statesman, Chü Yuan-Ming who was drowned in the Mi Lo river in Hunan in the second century B.C. A certain similarity in the ritual has been either copied from the Chinese, or more probably arisen from the nature of any water holiday. The real Dragon Boat Holiday, in the 5th Month, is not celebrated at all by the Min Chia, although many of the Chinese shops shut for the day and the schools close. In Ta Li it is only a secular holiday observed by Chinese institutions, without religious significance.

The temple of Lur Wa, the Dragon King, is on the shore

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

of Erh Hai lake, in the small village called Der Ser Mo by the Min Chia, and, after the temple, Lung Wang Miao by the Chinese. The old buildings were wrecked by the great earthquake of 1925, but have been partially rebuilt. The great hall of the temple and a detached pavilion built on an artificial island connected with the shore by a bridge are all that are now standing. This temple differs from any Buddhist or Taoist shrine by having no image of the deity. Instead there is a large lacquered tablet on the altar inscribed with the name and title of Lur Wa, and behind the altar a rather fine mural painting of the Dragon emerging from dense rolling rain clouds. In the courtyard before this hall, still encumbered by the ruins of old buildings, and on the open space between the temple and the shore, crowds of worshippers, as usual mainly women, perform the accustomed rites of prostration and incense burning. As at the Kuan Yin temple, hawkers sell incense and spirit money, while the societies of women abstainers chant their endless repetition of the name of the god before improvised altars. The island pavilion is thronged with worshippers who are busy releasing fish and eels and scattering rice on the water. This custom, called in Chinese "*fang shêng*" "to release life", has no doubt been borrowed from Buddhism. Its purpose is to acquire merit by saving the lives of creatures in danger of death, in accordance with the Buddhist prohibition against the killing of any living creature. As interpreted here it is supposed to be pleasing to the Dragon King, the lord of the lake and all that is in it, who will thus be more disposed to spare the lives of fishermen who, for the rest of the year are engaged not in releasing fish, but in catching them.

In practice, as everyone knows quite well, the fisher folk have been exceptionally busy for several days catching and preserving alive the fish and eels which they sell to the worshippers on the day of the festival. The fact that here

1: Fitzgerald H-5 (1937-1938) AE3 Sino-Tibetan
Border Peoples AE3

one does see many men, fishermen, engaged in this rite of releasing fish, perhaps proves that it is taken more seriously as an act of propitiation than most of the temple rituals.

For the great majority of those who crowd the shores of the lake on this day the attraction is not worship at the temple but boating picnics. Almost every family from the city, Chinese or Min Chia, hires a boat for the day, while the poor take places in one of the big cargo ships, devoted for the day to pleasure cruises. Many of the boats are decorated with coloured paper streamers and flowers either artificial or real, lotuses, sunflowers and paper roses (the real variety not being in season). This custom gives the festival its Min Chia name, Yo Huor Yeh, "Gay Flower Boats," a fact which may indicate that the custom has no relation to the Dragon Boats of other parts of China. When a Min Chia name is employed it is a sure indication of something ancient and independent of Chinese influence.

The boating expeditions, though largely pure pleasure excursions, always follow a set course. No boats merely sail about the lake at random. Close to Der Ser Mo village there is one of three large lagoons connected with the lake by a narrow channel. The boats first make a tour of this lagoon, then pass out into the main lake and enter the other lagoons in turn, returning to Shier Yu village at the mouth of the first lagoon. No one has any explanation for this set course, from which they never depart, although it may be repeated several times in the course of the day. When asked, Min Chia either say that it is the custom, or explain it by saying that landsmen are afraid to go far out on to the lake. This latter explanation is clearly nonsense for the lake is in constant use as a means of communication, and at this season is quite calm. It is an example of an explanation invented on the spur of the moment to satisfy the questioner.

Just as the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival of the 5th